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ABSTRACT

To understand how children respond to and make use of portrayals of the sexes on television, 192 third and eighth grade students participated in a study to determine what they notice and how important these distinctions are to them. The study obtained children's same/different paired comparisons of eight concepts--me, my mother, an average woman, an average television woman, and four television characters (Bionic Woman, Cher, Mary Tyler Moore, and Mrs. Walton), and explored two models of influence on salience scores, a television viewing and perceptions model and a sex role socialization model, using the three comparison dimensions of youth/vitality, reality, and competence. Results indicated that the variables of a sex-role socialization model are related to children's use of these three dimensions for comparing real-life and television women and that cognitive variables of children's own perceptions can be used in media effects studies. (AFA)

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How Children Evaluate Real-Life
and Television Women

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Children are a media audience of special concern to parents, educators, and researchers. They are exposed to a great deal of television, and we now have good reason to believe that children are influenced, for good and ill, by the content of television. The urgency of a few years ago to discover television's "direct effects" on children has now shifted to understanding processes behind television effects, often with the implicit hope of better prediction and controlling television's influence.

While researchers have had some success in predicting media effects with social intervening variables such as family communication patterns (c.f., McLeod & Chaffee, 1972) or parental emphasis on non-aggression (Dominick & Greenberg, 1972), many of the key processes involved in media effects seem to be internal and cognitive. Often even where a social pattern or process can be used as a predictor, subsequent unmeasured changes in the child's perception of the situation are assumed to be the direct influence on the effects process. Commonly, one presumes differences or changes in such concepts as attention, perceived similarity, involvement, or perceived applicability of modeled behavior to explain children's response or lack of response to television. A continuing source of unease with these explanations, however, is that the constructs posited are not directly measureable.

Recently, however, some communication researchers have attempted to develop and use measures of more fundamental cognitive constructs relevant to communication effects. For example, Greenberg (1974) factor analyzed children's responses to gratification items derived from other children's essays about television. In this way he obtained and then used (see also Brown, Cramond, & Wilde, 1974) an organized system of gratifications obtained from television based on (and presumably close to) children's own perceptions instead of those of an adult researcher.

Similarly, Hawkins (1977) developed an a priori factor structure of the perceived reality of television, and formed questionnaire items based on the structure. Factor analysis of children's responses to the items produced several dimensions which were differently related to age (instead of a universal increase in

in "adult discount" with age).

These factor analyses take important steps toward measuring cognitive constructs that may be important intervening variables, but factor analysis as a technique has the built-in limitation that the researcher must provide the respondent with the dimensions of comparison (such as paired-opposite adjectives rating a television character) without knowing whether these items and thus the discovered dimensions are at all salient in the respondent's cognitive structure. Multi-dimensional scaling techniques (c.f., Shepard, Romney, & Nerlove, 1972) allow the respondent to make same/different judgments between pairs of concepts on whatever dimensions is salient. For a group of respondents, the technique identifies dimensions that account for most of the variance in responses, and can also determine the salience of each dimension for each respondent. As an example of the technique's application to communication, Reeves and Greenberg (1977) used multi-dimensional scaling to discover four dimensions children used to compare television characters: humor, strength, attractiveness and activity.

Internal, individual constructs such as these might be especially important for understanding children's responses to images of the sexes on television. We already know, for example, that television content presents a very limited and stereotyped view of sex roles (c.f., Busby, 1975; Pingree & Hawkins, forthcoming), and that the limited evidence available suggests that such content does act to teach and enforce traditional sex roles (c.f., Pingree & Hawkins, forthcoming). But we often presume as adults that we can identify what content will have different effects. For example, we might argue that a competent woman physician will affect children very differently from an incompetent one. But a logically prior consideration is to ascertain just what children are seeing. They may not realize that the woman is competent or incompetent, they may not notice that the physician is a woman, or they may attend to other irrelevant things (from an adult point of view), such as how she wears her hair or how she laughs. It is their perceptions, if anything, that will affect how they respond to women and men in television content. To understand how children respond to and make use of

portrayals of the sexes on television, we need to know what they notice, and how important these distinctions are to them.

The present study obtained children's same-different paired-comparisons of eight concepts: Me, My Mother, An average Woman, An Average Television Woman, and four television characters (Bionic Woman, Cher, Mary Tyler Moore, and Mrs. Walton). Both real and television people were included, because the ways in which and the extent to which children distinguish these two categories are probably crucial for whether and how they use television portrayals of women. No male characters or people were included in part for pragmatic reasons: paired comparisons of eight concepts require 28 comparisons; an additional eight concepts raises that to 120. In addition, while children's perceptions of women probably cannot be fully explained without reference to their perceptions of men, it is unlikely that doubling the number of concepts would double the information obtained. The literature on sex-role stereotypes (e.g., Bem, 1976) suggests that the two sex-role stereotypes mirror each other considerably. Finally, women's roles may be changing more and certainly seem to be changing more on television, so an initial focus only on women seemed justified.

In addition to understanding how television characters are distinguished, it is important to understand what other factors may influence these discriminations. That is, while a multi-dimensional scaling analysis of children's comparisons of these eight concepts will locate overall dimensions of comparisons, we also need to know whether other factors make these dimensions more or less salient. Naturally, implicit in the use of salience scores is the assumption that an individual will use a dimension to determine responses to television only if it is salient.

Using the salience of the overall dimensions for each individual as dependent variables, we will explore two models of influence on the salience scores, a television viewing and perceptions model and a sex-role socialization model. In both cases, however, grade, sex, and their interaction will be controlled for first. Grade should be a predictor of salience scores because developmental changes between third and eighth grades should lead to much greater sophistication

and detail in children's comprehension of television content, and thus to a greater ability and willingness to distinguish characters. Reeves and Greenberg's (1977) findings about the differential importance of strength and attractiveness for girls and boys suggest that sex is also an important variable to be controlled. In addition, boys might simply be less able than girls to distinguish female characters. The grade by sex interaction was included because of several recent studies (Guttentag & Bray, 1976; Pingree, in press) in which eighth grade boys responded very differently to sex-role information than girls or younger boys.

For the television viewing model, the basic premise is that television viewing and beliefs about television should affect how children perceive real-life and television women. Specifically, watching a great deal of traditional women on television could well make traditional attributes of women even more salient, while a heavy diet of super-women might make these attributes less salient and non-traditional attributes more salient. As a separate issue within this model, the perceived reality of television has always been proposed to intervene in television effects, such that television perceived as real will be more affecting. While how real children believe television to be might well be related to the salience of our comparison dimensions, there are no clear grounds for predicting the nature of this direct relationship. However, perceived reality should have a clear interactive relationship with the two viewing measures, with high perceived reality acting in general to heighten their relationships to salience scores.

Starting instead from a sex-role socialization perspective, one would expect salience of these dimensions to be related to the behavior of the role models available to the child, and also to the child's attitude about women's appropriate roles and behavior. Specifically, a child's mother, as a highly salient adult female, provides a model of behavior that might well alter how that child evaluates and compares other women. A child whose mother works, especially if she works in a job that women have not traditionally held, may find traditionally

female dimensions of comparison less important than a child whose mother holds the traditional housewife role. Similarly, those children who hold non-traditional attitudes about women -- they can be independent, hold any role, are competent, and should not be evaluated on appearance any more than men are -- should also find traditional dimensions of comparison less salient.

METHODS

Respondents

The main questionnaire was answered by 192 children in the third and eighth grades of the public schools of a suburban Wisconsin community. The usable sample was reduced to 188 because 4 respondents made uniform responses to all 28 MDS items or were unfamiliar with a character. This final sample included 46 girls and 46 boys in grade three and 48 girls and 48 boys in grade eight. Five months later, prior to the start of the new television season, a supplementary wave of questionnaires were answered by 150 students from the same schools (38 girls and 46 boys in grade four, and 29 girls and 23 boys in grade nine; 14 ninth grade subjects refused to answer questions about their gender). This questionnaire contained questions about the undimensional attributes of concepts used in the multi-dimensional scaling in the main questionnaire.

Measures

Multi-dimensional scaling techniques were used to allow the respondents to make same/different judgments between pairs of concepts on whatever dimension is salient for her/him. In the first questionnaire, respondents made same/different judgments between themselves, their mothers, an average woman, an average television woman and four female television characters (Mrs. Walton, Cher, Mary Tyler Moore, and the Bionic Woman.)

Eight Likert-type items were developed to measure attitudes about women's roles and abilities. Two items each were designed to measure attitudes on four hypothesized dimensions: roles, appearance, competence and independence. These eight items factored into two main dimensions for which factor scores were computed: roles and appearance, and competence and independence.

An additional eight Likert-type items were used to measure the children's perceptions of television reality. Two items each were generated from each of the four dimensions discovered by Hawkins (1977). The four were: Magic Window -- people, Magic Window--events, Social Expectations, and Usefulness. In a preliminary factor analysis, these eight items were reduced into two factors and associated factor scores. The first factor was Social Expectations and Usefulness: i.e., whether television content fits children's expectations about life and the world around them and whether television is useful for daily living. The second factor was a Magic Window factor: i.e., the degree to which children believe television is a Magic Window through which one can look at on-going life.

In addition, other questions asked how much television per day the child watched, and the frequency of watching 12 popular prime time programs with women as major characters. Factor analysis of viewing patterns revealed a cluster of superwomen (Bionic Woman, Policewoman, Samantha, and Isis) and a cluster of traditional, situation-comedy women (Mary Tyler Moore, Edith Bunker, Rhoda, Maude, and Cher). Indices were then constructed to reflect how often children watched superwomen and traditional women.

And using the school records, the researchers determined whether each child's mother was employed outside the home, the nature of that job, and whether the job was full or part-time.

In the second wave of the study, respondents were asked to complete six semantic differential scales about each of the eight MDS concepts. The six

attributes were: funny, smart, good looking, acts like people you know, strong, and real person.

Procedures

The researchers in all cases introduced the questionnaire as being designed to find out "what young people think about TV." Eighth graders answered the self-administered questionnaire in a large classroom with two researchers present. Third graders responded in an auditorium with a researcher reading the questions and response choices out loud slowly as another circulated among the children answering questions and making sure that children were marking the correct line on their answer sheet.

RESULTS

Respondents' paired-comparisons of the eight concepts were analyzed using INDSICAL procedure (Carroll and Wish, 1974). A preliminary analysis with the four age-by-sex groups suggested that a three-dimensional solution (accounting for 84% of the variance in responses among the four groups) was preferable to higher-order solutions that added little variance. We then obtained a three-dimensional solution for the 188 individuals of the sample and used it for further analyses.

Table 1 presents the loadings of the eight concepts on the three dimensions. The relative positions of the eight concepts suggest interpretations of the dimensions, but by themselves these are not fully convincing explanations. For example, the first dimension is bounded at one end by the Bionic Woman and Cher, and at the other end by Mrs. Walton and an Average Woman, perhaps reflecting an attractiveness dimensions. However, one must then conclude that the children saw Mary Tyler Moore as somewhat unattractive. Similarly, the distinction between Me and My Mother on the one hand and all the television characters on the other suggests a reality interpretation of the second dimension, and the loadings of the third dimension can be interpreted as reflecting competence,

but basing these decisions simply on the researcher's judgment makes them very subjective.

However, the two age groups used in this study were re-sampled before the start of the new (1976-1977) television season and were asked to rate each of the eight concepts on six unidimensional attributes previously found salient in children's perceptions of television (Hawkins, 1977; Reeves & Greenberg, 1976): Funny, smart, good-looking, strong, real person, and acts like people you know. Mean ratings on each attribute for each concept were regressed against the three dimensional loadings for that concept (i.e., a multiple regression with $N = 8$), as shown in Table 2. Because the eight concepts used here were a purposive (i.e., non-random) sample from the universe of potential concepts, the indicated significance levels of individual regression coefficients should not be regarded as allowing inferences, but only as rough guides to interpreting the three dimensions. The situation is very closely analogous to the interpretation of factor loadings, where the investigator fixes a minimum coefficient size, and then interprets a dimension using all coefficients larger than that minimum. Still, judging by the fairly large R^2 for most attributes, these unidimensional scales were closely related to the dimensions.

The loadings in Table 2 serve to confirm the initial impression (from Table 1) about interpreting Dimension 2; it seems most clearly to distinguish real people from television people, although some humor may also be involved. And Dimension 3, related to smartness and strength and bounded by the Bionic Woman and Cher, seems reasonable interpreted as Competence.

However, Dimension 1 is not strongly related to any of the six attributes, and the loadings do not give much support for calling it an attractiveness dimension. Only the two attributes having to do with perceived reality are significantly predicted by Dimension 1, but these significance levels are due to the very large R^2 for these attributes, which leaves only a tiny fraction of variance unaccounted for to serve as the denominator of an F -ratio. Furthermore,

Dimension 1 and Dimension 2 are essentially uncorrelated ($r = .03$): they should have been at least somewhat related if they both had to do with perceptions of reality. And the concept "Me" falls with Cher and the Bionic Woman at what would be the "unreal" end if Dimension 1 were interpreted as second perceived reality dimension. Given the relatively weak loadings of these six attributes on Dimension 1, we suspect that it reflects other attributes not include in our list, possibly activity, or youth, or having desirable qualities. In any case, finding Cher and Bionic Woman together makes sense and the similar but weaker loading for "me" is quite reasonable. Finding all other concepts, and especially Mrs. Walton and the average woman, at the opposite end, also fits these interpretations. We would like to have been more precise about this most salient dimension of comparison, but for the purposes of these articles we will refer to it as Youth/Activity.

In the tests of the models that follow, we have used individual salience scores on the three dimensions as dependent variables in two multiple regression models corresponding to the television model and the sex-role model described earlier. In each case, variables were entered in groups for reasons of theoretical and pragmatic priority; no implication of casual priority is intended. For example, in the sex-role model sex was entered before attitudes about women both because it is a more easily-observable external characteristic, and to provide a conservative test of the attitudinal variables. To expand on this latter point, one's attitudes about women probably are related to one's sex, so that testing the attitudinal variables first may substitute a complicated measure as a surrogate for a simple one. On the other hand, if the attitudinal measures add significant variance to an equation after sex is controlled, one can have more confidence that a true relationship exists. Similarly, interaction terms were entered last because the variables combined to form interaction terms have theoretic importance in their own right to which significant interactions would be embellishments.

Grade, sex, and their interaction were entered first in both models (Tables 3 & 4), although results differ slightly because 13 respondents were omitted from the second model because of missing data. Grade was not an important predictor of salience scores, although the eighth graders believed the Youth/Activity dimension slightly more salient. Sex, however, was important for all three dimensions: both the Youth/Activity and Competence of these eight women were more salient for girls, while the Reality comparison was more salient for the boys. That is, boys do seem less able to distinguish women on the one dimension that may be partly a "like-me, unlike-me" scale. The interaction of grade and sex was a significant predictor only for Competence, which was more salient with age for girls but less salient with age for boys.

In the television model (Table 3), the second block of variables entered contained the viewing measures for the two types of female television characters and factor scores on the two perceived reality dimensions. As a block, these variables are important only for salience of the Reality dimension, and even there beliefs about the perceived reality of television are irrelevant. Instead, the more children watched traditional television women, the less important was the Reality dimension for distinguishing the eight concepts. here. In other words, viewers of shows with traditional women (generally purporting to show ordinary people as well) make less use of the distinction between real and television women. Likewise, only one of the interactions of viewing and perceived reality is significant: Those children who believe television characters and events are similar to real life (Social Expectations) find Youth/Activity less salient the more they view the Superwomen; the opposite is true of those who believe television unlike real life. However, these two significant relationships are so few in comparison to the number of tests in this model, that we must not rely heavily on them. On balance, television viewing and beliefs about television have surprisingly little relationship to

the ways in which children distinguish real-life and television women.

The picture is somewhat different for the sex-role socialization model (Table 4), at least for the Youth/Activity dimension. Those children whose mothers work, and especially those whose mothers work in nontraditional occupations, are less likely to use Youth/Activity to distinguish the eight women here. And both attitudes about women factor scores were related to salience scores. Believing women competent and independent was associated with greater salience of Youth/Activity and lesser salience of Reality. In contrast, believing that women can take on any role and that a woman's appearance is no more important than a man's was associated with lessened salience of Youth/Activity. Finally, the two attitude factors interact such that each of these main effects occurs only when the two factors are consistent with each other. That is, Youth/Activity is a more salient dimension of comparison for those who believe women competent and independent only if they also believe that women can take on any role. Or conversely, Youth/Activity is more salient for those who believe women's roles should be limited only if they also believe that women cannot be competent and independent.

DISCUSSION

Third and eighth grade children asked to compare eight concepts (Me, Mother, Average Woman, Average TV Woman, Bionic Woman, Cher, Mary Tyler Moore, and Mrs. Walton) did so basically along three dimensions. The second and third seemed quite clearly identifiable as distinguishing real people from television characters and competent from incompetent ones. The first dimension was less easily defined since it contained attractiveness, strength and unreality, but it may represent an overall comparison of youth and activity, and perhaps evaluation and admiration as well.

Considering the inclusion of both real and television concepts here and the exclusive focus on women, that there is some correspondence to Reeves and Greenberg's (1977) dimensions is encouraging for both studies (Reeves and Greenberg's dimensions have been criticized as derived from a largely male concept pool). The Competence and Youth/Activity dimensions here are not identical to their Masculine Strength and Feminine Attractiveness, but the relationships are worth noting, given the difference in concepts compared.

The main point of this study, however, was to locate individual differences in the salience of these comparison dimensions through exploration of two different models. It is suggestive that heavy viewers of traditional situation comedy women, all of whom are presented in ostensibly "normal" life, make less use of the Reality dimension to distinguish real and television women; perhaps a heavy diet of purportedly real women on television blurs the television-reality distinction. However, if this were so, one would also expect to find a relationship between viewing such women and expressed beliefs about the reality of television, but the correlations with these two factor scores are both less than .10. If this relationship truly exists (i.e., is not an artifact of chance), its action is so subtle that it affects perceptions of women without affecting consciously expressed beliefs about television.

The one significant interaction in the television model is also interesting. Heavy viewing of television superwomen decreases the salience of the Youth/Activity dimension only for those children who believe television matches their expectations about the world and is useful. Only those children who are the most skeptical about the Social Expectations reality of television find the Youth/Activity dimension more salient as they watch more superwomen. That is, if one expects television to provide useful, life-like presentations, heavy viewing of television superwomen such as Isis, Bionic Woman, Samantha, and Policewoman decreases the importance of what we have labeled Youth/Activity for distinguishing real and television women.

However, while both of these results are interesting and have provocative implications about the effects of television, they are too isolated to be relied on heavily. Although television viewing and beliefs about television might seem ideal predictors of dimensions used to distinguish women on television and in real life, as a group they actually were basically unrelated.

Sex-role attitudes and models turned out to be better predictors, even though they seemed theoretically somewhat more distant than the television variables.

As expected, a working mother was associated with lessened salience of the Youth/Activity dimension, especially if she worked in a traditionally male occupation. While one would conversely expect a working mother to heighten the salience of the Competence dimension, no such relationship was found. However, this may reflect the somewhat tenuous nature of a third dimension derived from only eight concepts which added only about 12% to the variance explained by the dimensions.

Attitudes about women's place were related both to Youth/Activity and Reality. Not surprisingly, Youth/Activity was a less salience dimension of comparison for children who believe that women can take on any role and that their appearance is no more important than a man's. However, the relationships involving children's beliefs about women's competence and independence are somewhat more complex. Children who believe women competent and independent are less likely to use the Reality dimension for comparisons and more likely to use Youth/Activity. It may be that children perceive women on television (or at least the four we used) as relatively competent to begin with, so that those who believe women generally incompetent must segregate the competent television women by emphasizing the Reality dimension of comparison. The competence-Youth/Activity relationship runs somewhat counter to other findings where Youth/Activity has been associated with traditional models. However, as noted before, the Youth/Activity dimension is more complicated than its name implies

perhaps containing also an element of strength, so that a positive relationship with a belief in women's independence and ability is not unthinkable. The picture is somewhat illuminated by the interaction of the two factor scores: the main effect of each factor score on salience of Youth/Activity occurs only when reinforced by a similar response on the other factor.

Overall, then, the variables of the sex-role socialization model are related to children's use of these three dimensions for comparing real-life and television women. Casual statements are basically premature (although it is hard to see how perceptions of television characters could influence mother's job), but these sex-role socialization variables are much better predictors of how children distinguish real-life and television women than their television use and beliefs.

If these distinctions made on paper-and-pencil questionnaires are carried over to television viewing situations, and there is no obvious reason they should not be, then we must conclude that specific social attitudes and a non-television model are more influential on at least one sort of perception of television than are more direct television models and general beliefs about television.

The present study, however, provides only a first step in using cognitive variables of children's own perceptions in media effects studies. Once we better understand the dimensions on which children make comparisons and know which children emphasize these dimensions and which do not, we should be able to use that knowledge to elucidate the processes behind children's responses to television. Implicit in any salience score analysis is the assumption that a greater emphasis on a dimension will make a child more likely to use that dimension when faced with the concepts on a normal situation. What is needed is a direct application of perceptual dimensions and salience scores such as these to children's responses to actual television programming.

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Table 1

Loadings of the Eight Concepts on
the Three MDS Dimensions

	Dimension		
	1 (Youth/Activity)	2 (Reality)	3 (Competence)
Average Woman	-.33	-.01	.10
Average TV Woman	-.22	-.21	-.31
Me	.23	.70	.13
My Mother	-.23	.46	.23
Bionic Woman	.68	-.28	.45
Cher	.37	-.11	-.73
Mary Tyler Moore	-.17	-.31	-.13
Mrs. Walton	-.34	-.24	.26
% of variance	52%	20%	12%

Standardized Regression Coefficients of Unidimensional
Attributes on the MDS Dimensions

	Dimension			R ²
	1 (Youth/Activity)	2 (Reality)	3 (Competence)	
Funny	.26	.74	-.18	.60
Smart	-.01	.44	.72 ^b	.83 ^b
Good-looking	.45	.30	.41	.50
Acts like people I know	-.36 ^b	.88 ^c	.15	.97 ^c
Strong	.47	.36	.60 ^b	.79
Real Person	-.57 ^b	.78 ^c	.19	.90 ^b

b; $p < .05$

c; $p < .01$

N = 8

Table 3

Television Viewing and Beliefs as Predictors
of Individual Salience Scores on the Dimensions

Independent Variables	Dim 1	Dim 2	Dim 3
Grade	.103*	-.123	-.002
Sex	-.214 ^c	.217 ^b	-.125 ^a
Grade X Sex	.013	-.016	.155 ^b
Increment to R ²	.073 ^c	.080 ^c	.036 ^b
Perceived Reality (Social Exp.)	-.017	.020	.026
Perceived Reality (Magic Window)	.030	-.031	.011
Viewing Traditional TV Women	.112	-.152 ^b	-.020
Viewing TV Super Women	.016	-.115	.007
Increment to R ²	.013	.040 ^a	.002
Social Exp. X Superwomen	-.079	.119	-.054
Magic Window X Traditional	.082	-.058	.007
Magic Window X Superwomen	-.157 ^b	-.044	.044
Social Exp. X Traditional	.000	.000	.000
Increment to R ²	.035 ^a	.018	.004
Total R ²	.120 ^c	.137 ^b	.043

a. $p < .10$ b. $p < .05$ c. $p < .01$ N=188

*Entries are standardized regression coefficients

Table 4
Mother's Job and Attitudes About Women as Predictors
of Individual Salience Scores on the Dimensions

Independent Variables	Dim 1	Dim 2	Dim 3
Grade	.145 ^a	-.114	.012
Sex	-.161 ^a	.192 ^b	-.071
Grade X Sex	.030	-.028	.145 ^a
Increment to R ²	.076 ^c	.082 ^c	.045 ^b
Mother Works	-.143	.033	-.015
Mother's Job Non-traditional	-.170 ^b	.075	.014
Increment to R ²	.024	.003	.000
Women Competent & Independent	.166 ^a	-.156 ^a	.102
Women's Roles & Attractiveness	-.143 ^b	-.036	.102
Increment to R ²	.037 ^b	.015	.015
Women Competent X Women's Roles	.140 ^a	-.024	-.026
Increment to R ²	.019 ^a	.005	.000
Total R ²	.156 ^c	.100 ^b	.061

a. $p < .10$ b. $p < .05$ c. $p < .01$ N=175